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ABSTRACT

This book examines the many popular representations of student life at women's colleges produced in the United States during the Progressive Era. According to the book, in hundreds of college novels, newspaper accounts, popular periodical essays, and scientific treatises, the "college woman" was described and defined in a period when women's higher education was still socially suspect. The book reports that these representations had a large impact on how the public perceived women's higher education, painting a picture of college life that must have seemed irresistible to young women, and transforming the public image of the college woman from that of a homely, sexless oddity, doomed to spinsterhood, to that of a vibrant, attractive, athletic young woman who would eventually marry. Taking issue with other scholarly interpretations of the Progressive Era, the book argues that these representations actually helped to perpetuate the status quo and did little to advance women's social rights. Adopting a theoretic stand informed by such cultural critics and historians as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, the book examines the representation of college women in this period, showing that representation not only described the college woman but also helped constitute her. A selected bibliography is attached. (NKA)

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